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ABSTRACT

Numerous topics related to the teaching of English are discussed in this paper. Separate sections deal with changes in the teaching of English between 1965 and 1975 and problems faced by English teachers and by schools in 1975; topics that may be discussed at departmental meetings in an attempt to work out a detailed rationale for a school's English program; the development of a positive public relations program; ways of dealing with the school/college articulation problem; and ideas and strategies for improving a school's English program. (GW)

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THE INKWELL

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ENGLISH 1975: Prospects and Priorities

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM

There can be little debate as we enter the second half of the decade of the seventies that we are teaching in dramatic, controversial, and exciting times. The past ten years has seen enormous--and, we think, positive--changes in the schools and in the teaching of English and humanities in middle, junior high, and senior high schools. If you have doubts about the significance of this growth, simply think back a decade to consider the way English was being taught in 1965. Play the nostalgia game with us for just a moment, recalling the changes we have witnessed since 1965, when...

--a survey revealed that SILAS MARNER was required reading of students in 75% of this nation's high schools.

--paperback books were a novelty in English classes, and the "important" question being asked by administrators was, "Will paperbacks hold up as well as hardbound books in the classroom?"

--CATCHER IN THE RYE was perceived as a dirty book.

--the only electives in the English program were "supplementary" courses

like Journalism or Yearbook, and the only real "choice" offered to students was whether they wanted to enter the college preparatory or the business track.

--the only movies being shown in English classes were grainy, black-and-white affairs with titles like, "Using Lively Adverbs," or "The Life and Writing of Stephen Vincent Benet."

So things have changed, and for the better. The use of electives, media, paperback books, thematic units and courses, alternative kinds of language study and a dozen other innovations have made English classes vastly more interesting and productive than they were a decade ago.

But it is equally important to note in 1975 that English teachers (and the schools in general) are facing issues and problems that threaten to blunt and negate the very dramatic growth that has taken place in English classes.

For instance, the censors are out in full force. Although CATCHER IN THE RYE seems like pretty tame stuff in the face of films and books like THE EXORCIST, both THE EXORCIST and CATCHER--and MANCHILD IN THE PROMISED LAND and HUCKLEBERRY FINN and, yes, REBECCA OF SUNNYBROOK FARM--have been

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censored within the past year or two. Recent events in Charleston, West Virginia, and elsewhere must be of concern to all teachers; it is not safe to say, "It can't happen here."

The basic skillists are also out in force with their ringing cry, "Why didn't anybody teach my kid to spell/read/write/talk right/fill out a job application?" The fact that basic skills are far more complex than most realize, and the fact that basic skills are learned through broadly based language experiences, not through drill and memorization, escapes them, and thus they demand a return to the good old days when people allegedly "knew" how to spell/diagram sentences/"do" grammar. Coupled with the continued expansion of the accountability and career education movements, the basic skills thrust seriously hampers teachers who are enlightened about the nature of language and language learning.

Finally, within the schools themselves teaching conditions are hardly ideal. Teaching English in 1975 is more complex than ever, and faced with oversized classes, increasing numbers of preparations, diminishing supplies and budgets, too few books, and taxpayers who are either hostile or indifferent to the condition of the schools, teachers find it more and more difficult to work toward their true objective of helping young people become more literate.

It is unlikely, we think, that the progress of the past ten years will be reversed. English departments won't allow themselves to be pushed back into the era of the hardbound anthology, the survey course, and the annual (fruitless) battle with grammar. But it becomes increasingly difficult for the teacher to continue growing--as an individual and

as a teacher. In these difficult times, we think teachers need a source of ideas and alternatives to support them in their teaching.

That's where THE INKWELL is designed to be of assistance. THE INKWELL is avowedly a "cookbook," a digest of practical teaching ideas in a newsletter format that we think you will find convenient for classroom use. But we hasten to add that it is not intended to be a collection of gimmicks, the proverbial "bag of tricks," for no teacher (and no English class) can survive for any extended period of time on techniques that work simply because they are novel, because they shock, or because they are merely entertaining. Further, the ideas presented here will show internal consistency; we will not present ideas that "seem to work" but which lack a sound rationale for teaching English in the seventies.

Thus we won't do an issue on "101 Novel Approaches to the Book Report" (but we will do one that discusses ways of extending students' responses to literature). We won't be considering "How to Make Grammar Fun!" (but we will do an issue on ways of exploring language use and misuse in society). And we assuredly won't have an issue on "Teaching the 500-Word Theme" (though we are developing one that stresses ways of engaging students creatively in so-called "serious" writing).

Underlying all our discussions is the belief that teachers are at the heart of solving classroom teaching problems. We do not believe that change can be imposed from the outside. Change in the schools evolves from within, created by teachers who are willing to explore and experiment with new ideas and techniques and possibilities. THE INKWELL is designed to support that kind of teaching and that kind of teacher.

The English Department

ESTABLISHING PRIORITIES

In *ALTERNATIVES IN ENGLISH: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF ELECTIVE PROGRAMS* (National Council of Teachers of English, 1972), George Hillocks describes finding that in a sampling of seventy-five curriculum guides from "exemplary" schools, only five schools had taken time to work out a detailed rationale for the program they were offering. This was frequently reflected in curriculum patterns that were wildly inconsistent and fragmentary, with electives and mini-courses proliferating aimlessly, creating a hodge-podge of unrelated courses. Whether or not a school as "gone the elective route," failure to have a rationale for the English program is frequently frustrating to teachers (who have difficulty seeing where they and their students "fit in") and baffling to parents and administrators (who all too often are suspicious of the English department to begin with).

The "altogether" English department needs to spend time discussing basic issues and fundamental questions, with the aim of producing a rather detailed statement of aims and teaching strategies in support of its program--not just the usual curriculum guide blather about "the aims of education in a democracy," but a serious, articulate discussion of aims and priorities. Some topics for departmental meetings:

- What is our subject (call it English, language arts, humanities, communication arts, or whatever)? What (if anything) do young people need to know about English these days? What do people do with language in society?

- Is there any role for English teachers beyond the teaching of "fundamentals?"

- Should English be a required subject? What would happen to our department if it were no longer required?

- What are we doing right? And . . . to the contrary?

- What are our unique strengths as teachers? How can we draw on those strengths as a group? (Have a department meeting where you talk candidly about your teaching skills: "This I do well . . . this, not so well." Take responsibility for sharing one of your strengths with someone else.)

- What are our priorities for the seventies? What issues/problems/topics must concern us most deeply? What action can we take to solve those problems?

The altogether department is also a community, though in far too many schools departments get together so infrequently that they are little more than collections of individuals who happen to teach in the same building. Some projects for the departmental community:

- Have a session called "This Works (for Me)." Price of admission: a dittoed or mimeographed handout describing one teaching technique that invariably works (for you).

- Create a "Free Ditto Exchange," and make the sharing of teaching ideas a tradition in the department. (You may have trouble overcoming past bad experiences with this one, since many teachers jealously guard their ideas for fear that someone will "steal" them. To help solve that, set up ground rules about the use and misuse of other people's ideas. Also make it policy that when you use someone's idea you write him or her a note acknowledging it.)

●Have a "Problems and Pleasures" session where you talk over the things in your teaching that give you greatest pleasure, along with things that present problems. It is a great deal easier to talk about "failings" if you describe them yourself rather than waiting for someone else to do it, and it may be that your problem is someone else's pleasure.

●Hold an articulation meeting for the junior high/middle school and senior high faculties (but don't hold the meeting until both groups have worked out their individual rationales and can talk articulately about what they are trying to accomplish). Ground rule: Neither

group is to attack the other. Senior high teachers are not allowed to criticize the preparation of incoming freshmen. Junior high/middle school people must restrain their comments about what happens to kids when they are "thrown into the high school jungle."

●Meet with the librarian or media resource person to discuss energizing the school's resources. Make the library a functioning extension of the English program, not just a place to send bright kids or trouble-makers, or the location of once-yearly lectures on the use of the card catalog and the mysteries of the Dewey Decimal System.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

and the English Department

As communications specialists, we English teachers have done an extremely poor job of communicating with the public. (We have, unfortunately, been successful in transmitting a fear of "bad English" to the public, and this increases the difficulty of working closely with parents.) Too often the public is not adequately informed about our plans and hopes, with the result that parents learn about programs second-hand. When that happens, they often fail to get the full picture and are misinformed about what is happening: "The English Department has just tossed out grammar. They'll let those kids say anything down there." "Did you hear they're teaching dirty and un-American books in a course called 'The American Dream'?" "There's a new course called 'Reading for Pleasure' at the junior high. Can you imagine? The kids just sit around reading, not learning anything!"

Once those anguished cries (unfair though they may be) reach the ears of the administration, the English department is in trouble, for no amount of rational explanation will allay fears that are based on hearsay. The English department, then, needs to develop a positive public relations program, informing parents and administrators (not conning them) about the aims and techniques of the program:

●Formulate and publicize a book selection and censorship policy, one that explains how required and voluntary books are selected and "cleared" by the department. (The American Library Association, The National Council of Teachers of English, and The Speech Communication Association have developed materials that can be of assistance.) Involve community members in the project and elicit their support. Make certain your policy includes provisions for community members to have input into the selection process (though obviously as

professionals, the English teachers should not surrender the right to select their own teaching materials).

One Note of Caution: In several recent censorship episodes, including the Charleston case, English teachers had followed a previously established book selection policy and were censored nevertheless. One can't, unfortunately, force a community to follow a procedure it may, in better times, have approved. One hopes, however, that the process of developing the statement may do enough for school-community relationships to head off future confrontations.

- Publicize your program. Dramatically. Invite parents to come hear about the English curriculum. If they won't come, write a feature article about your department. Take photographs. Deposit the story with the editor of your local newspaper, who will probably be delighted to run ready-made copy.

- Use student publications to build good public relations. Parents love to see their kids' work in print, and nothing provides more dramatic proof of the success of your program than good student work. Don't let your department's publications be limited to the yearbook or a single literary magazine. Arrange for a flood of publications to come from English classes--dittoed, mimeographed, printed, hand-copied--newsletters, fliers, posters, pamphlets, booklets, broadsheets, etc. Make it a goal to give every student in each class the opportunity to be published at least once each term. That's not as difficult as it sounds.

- Form a "Parents' Paperback Committee," a group of interested community members who are assigned the task of getting free and inexpensive materials in abundance for your department.

- Use parents as volunteers and tutors, especially in "remedial" programs. Give

parents full credit (but only partial responsibility) for improving the quality of students' reading and writing. (Later in the year we will have an INKWELL "EXTRA" on this topic, including suggestions for "training" paraprofessionals and aides and ideas for using them effectively.)

- Hold a public meeting on the use and abuse of standardized tests. Educate parents about the fallacies involved in interpreting test scores. Don't let your program be judged unfairly by inadequate data from state or national assessments or college entrance scores.

(The National Council of Teachers of English has prepared an especially useful kit of materials on this topic: THE USE AND ABUSE OF STANDARDIZED TESTS--A FIRST AID KIT FOR THE WALKING WOUNDED.)

- Develop an "accountability" system that is acceptable to your school district. One needn't be accountable solely on the basis of behavioral objectives and standardized tests. There are dozens of ways in which one can formulate objectives and assess whether or not students are learning. Explore some of the alternatives. (We will also take this up in more detail in a future issue of THE INKWELL.)

- Above all, be conscious of semantics in your public relations work, remembering that what the public hears is not always what you think you stated. For example, don't announce, "We're getting rid of grammar," since most parents will interpret that as meaning, "We are no longer concerned about the standards of 'good' English." Rather, talk about your new, broadly based language program that goes beyond matters of mere correctness into new areas of the social and practical uses of language. And show them how you are dealing with doublespeak and propaganda and advertising and mass media and dialects. Parents don't need to fear the "new English," but they do need to understand it.



THE UNWROUGHT PARAGRAPH

(Notes on School-College Articulation)

An especially important part of the current basic skills movement centers on the preparation of students for college. In the past year, many universities and colleges have raised a new-old cry: "The students in our freshman classes are badly prepared. They can't write! They can't read! The secondary schools are failing."

NEWSWEEK and TIME have presented "stories"--actually thinly disguised editorials--describing the "crisis" allegedly arising because of the number of students required to enroll in "bone-head" English courses. The publishing industry--financially troubled and increasingly conservative--has contributed the unsubstantiated claim that it is having to "water down" its offerings, reducing the reading grade level of its basic texts. And professors everywhere lament: "I can't teach 'these people.'" "How can I discuss literature when 'they' can't read the text." "I haven't read a well-wrought student paragraph in years."

These complaints are quickly picked up by the popular press and conservative parent groups as proof positive that the schools are in a state of decay.

Obviously English teachers--at all levels--need to be concerned that some of their students will be going on to institutions of higher education and those students do need to be "ready" for the experiences they will face there. But it is naive of the public, the press, and the colleges to place sole blame and responsibility on the secondary schools.

There are no simple solutions to the

college preparation problem, but we would like to offer the following observations about THE CASE OF THE UNWROUGHT PARAGRAPH:

●The "well-wrought" paragraph is a ghost of the nineteenth century, its schools and its rhetoricians. The carefully "built" paragraph, with neatly identifiable topic sentence, carefully marshalled supporting evidence, and delicately spun "clincher sentence" (the "zapper," as one junior high kid called it) is seldom used in the best contemporary writing. Today writers use much more flexible (though no less organized) structures. (Scan an issue of SATURDAY REVIEW or ATLANTIC with that in mind.) What many colleges seem to be demanding is not really what they want. (See next item.)

●What the colleges do want (we suspect) is students who are fully and broadly literate, not simply masters of rudimentary and obsolete writing forms. A good writer will shape an essay to fit the form of the material and the needs and expectations of the audience. The best preparation for college writing courses is probably a diversity of writing experiences, not a rigorous course in the academic essay and the term paper. (We will take up this issue again in INKWELL #3, "Basic Skills: Fundamentals? . . . or Frills?")

●Trying to prepare students directly for specific college experiences may be deceptive to the students. As one English teacher phrased it: "You can never predict what the kid will meet up with at the university. No matter what you teach, the student will run into idiosyncratic profs who want something else. If you teach paragraphs and outlining and tell kids

they're reading for college, you're deceiving them and setting them up for a bad experience."

- Axiom: No matter how well (or badly) you teach, the college students who return to visit you will complain that you didn't prepare them properly.

- The decline in college performance (if it is real) probably reflects the changing nature and values of the college-going population more than it does the quality of secondary school teaching and teachers. For over a decade the colleges have vigorously (and successfully) tried to gain diversity in the students enrolled in their programs. Further, during the same period the "usefulness" of a college education declined in the eyes of many high school students. (Why should a kid want a degree when his college-educated father has just been laid off by Boeing and his soon-to-graduate older sibling can't get a teaching job?) The college population has changed; it is predictable that it will perform differently from previous generations.

- Articulation between schools and col-

leges is more important than ever, but the schools must have an active role in determining what "articulation" means. As part of your public relations program, invite representatives of a university or college to a department meeting. Do not ask them, "How do you want us to prepare our students?" (They will probably tell you about the well-wrought paragraph and give you a list of "must" books for your curriculum.) Rather, tell them about your program and how it is designed to meet the needs of your students. Then ask them to explain how their program will continue to meet the needs of those students. In other words, how do they articulate with you? (Don't be reticent about asking that kind of abrupt question. College enrollments are declining, and you are in a "seller's market." If College A is not articulating with you, recommend that your students go to Colleges B or C, both of which will be delighted to receive them.)

- Help parents understand the articulation problem. Reassure them that you are concerned about college preparation, but don't be thrust into the position of teaching the well-wrought paragraph just to satisfy community worries.

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Ideas and strategies for teaching English, 1975:

- Hold a joint meeting with the history and/or social studies departments to consider possible multi-disciplinary courses. Use such courses as a way of breaking down conventional curricular or administrative structures.

- In schools where departments simply can't function, perhaps due to poor leadership or irreconcilable teaching styles, seek alternative ways of developing a sense of community and cohesiveness within the faculty. For

instance, you might be able to establish a "school-within-a-school" or an experimental or pilot program taught by the people who can work together successfully.

- Fight for control of your departmental budget. Ask the administration or the department head to give "grants" for the purchase of materials by individual teachers, rather than going through the process of school-wide adoptions.

- To stir up an inactive department, start writing proposals for pilot programs. Make the department respond to your ideas. If the department is not the problem, try the same technique with the principal.

- Try a teacher exchange between school buildings or even school districts for a

week or two. This brings in fresh ideas and costs nothing.

- Try the same kind of exchange with a nearby college or university. Have the college supply an instructor for your course, while you work with the prospective teachers.

- Fight for released time and adequate compensation for your department head. It is difficult for any department to function successfully when its leader has to teach four or five courses like everyone else and is underpaid as well.

- Give polls and surveys to students, teachers, parents, and other concerned people about their wishes and dreams for the schools. Put the computers to work analyzing that instead of processing standardized test scores.

- Keep administrators involved in and

informed about departmental activities. One technique that seems to work well involves asking the administration's advice on solving a curriculum or teaching problem. That way, the administrators come to have a direct stake in the success (or failure) of the department.

- Take a counsellor to lunch and tell him or her all about what you are doing in your classes.

- Take the time to write down a list of your own priorities for 1975 . . . and 1984 . . . and beyond. At no time in recent memory has it been more critical that Englist teachers have a clear sense of where they are going, what they are doing, why they are trying to accomplish certain things. Difficult though it may be, don't allow anyone or anything to distract you from pursuing your own well-wrought priorities.

THE INKWELL #1 was prepared by Stephen Judy